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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Evaluation of rural development activities of the United Nations system in three African least developed countries

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly and of the Economic and Social Council the comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Evaluation of rural development activities of the United Nations system in three African least developed countries" (Burkina Faso, Burundi and the United Republic of Tanzania) (JIU/REP/89/2).

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* A/45/50.

ANNEX

Comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Evaluation of rural development activities of the United Nations system in three African least developed countries" (Burkina Faso, Burundi and the United Republic of Tanzania)*

I. GENERAL

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) provides a broad review of technical assistance activities directly or indirectly related to rural development and implemented by some organizations of the United Nations system in co-operation with the Governments of three least developed countries in Africa, namely, Burkina Faso, Burundi and the United Republic of Tanzania. The Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) attaches importance to the report, as it does to the subject of rural development in general. The report has generally been favourably received by members of ACC. The comments that follow have been the subject of discussion within the framework of ACC and, in particular, through the ACC Task Force on Rural Development.

2. The style of the report is generally thought-provoking and challenges the current approach of the organizations of the United Nations system to rural development. ACC welcomes this fair and frank evaluation, which is timely in view of the fact that the organizations of the United Nations system are placing greater emphasis and importance on the need to orient technical assistance to the poorer segments of the rural population in developing countries, particularly the least developed countries.

3. Although the report is restricted to three African countries, its implications and recommendations go beyond that scope and, to a certain extent, they may be relevant to rural development projects in general. Furthermore, many of the problems cited, as well as the comments and recommendations made, pertain to the whole range of technical co-operation activities and not just to rural development projects. In this respect, ACC concurs with the view expressed in paragraph 109 of the report that it may serve as a valuable contribution "to the ongoing process of reflection on the effectiveness of the United Nations system's operational activities for development in general and technical co-operation activities in particular".

4. While the analysis is in general critical, ACC appreciates the intention of the report to examine past selected experiences with a view to improving the

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* For the text of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU/REP/89/2), see A/45/76-E/1990/12.

efficiency and effectiveness of technical assistance of the United Nations system. ACC stresses, however, that the proposed departure from the present project approach to rural development cannot be accomplished overnight, and would like to draw attention to the danger of arriving too soon at conclusions based on the analysis of selected projects in only three countries.

5. Members of ACC generally concur with many of the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the report. Members consider that they are not entirely new and that they have been widely raised and discussed, more often in academic and journalistic forums, but also in some intergovernmental forums. Some of the conclusions of the report reflect those already widely held throughout the United Nations system. Many members of ACC are already reflecting the gist of those recommendations, as appropriate, in their current projects. However, certain aspects of the analyses and views made in the report warrant specific comments from members of ACC, as specified below. Individual comments of the concerned organizations on some misunderstanding of facts relating to projects dealt with in the report are attached in the appendix to the present report.

II. SPECIFIC COMMENTS

6. With regard to the selection of the countries reviewed in the report, namely, Burkina Faso, Burundi and the United Republic of Tanzania, ACC observes that they do not fully represent the different development conditions of the more than 50 countries of the African continent. In fact, the report does not make any reference to the socio-cultural backgrounds, and the economic and political situation of those countries, which is particularly important, since factors external to those prevailing in the rural areas and/or the country often have a marked influence on the performance of the projects. Moreover, the main criterion utilized for the sampling exercise, which is indicated in paragraph 8 of the report: "the availability of a sufficiently large number and varied mix of completed and ongoing rural development projects ... in each country" could not be made completely evident through the set of the 25 projects selected.

7. For example, the sample does not include any projects of the Office for Projects Services (OPS)/United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) considers that that omission is unfortunate, as UNDP is increasingly involved in the implementation of integrated rural development projects funded through indicative planning figures (IPFs) and its other financing facilities. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) points out that the omission of any of its projects from the sample projects may reflect a narrow focus of the report, excluding certain special dimensions of the process for rural development. Consequently, the organization of rural functions into settlements, including small and intermediate centres as part of a settlements network serving rural areas, is an issue which has not been analysed in the report. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) regrets the absence of telecommunications projects in the study, given the vital role that telecommunications has to play in the socio-economic development of rural populations. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization (UNESCO) observes that, unfortunately, the report makes no particular mention of the role of education in rural development, and that the project sample includes only one UNESCO project, which has already been terminated.

8. Within the sample, only three projects (BKF/031/ITA, BKF/81/005 and BKF/2239/Exp.I) have a set of immediate objectives directly pointing to integrated rural development, and the others - with different degrees - deal with few sub-sectoral immediate objectives that may contribute in the long run to rural development. Some of those projects, e.g., BDI/81/016, Burundi 2286, BKF/80/012, URT/81/032, are mainly devoted to the identification and preparation of labour-intensive public works projects, national road improvement and maintenance or to short-term consultancies for the "popularization" of non-conventional sources of energy and therefore, although related to rural development, could be considered as having specific and limited objectives in an overall rural development context.

9. The report of the JIU questions the validity of the "top-down" project design approach for rural development activities at the poorest of the poor or at the grass-roots level needs. Members of ACC are equally concerned that the views of the beneficiaries are seldom taken into consideration, that many projects are prepared following a "top-down" approach and that many of them are isolated and have weak links with other parallel development activities. They commonly recognize and in fact stress the need to improve the preparation of project documents, with a view to defining target beneficiary groups clearly and giving priority to poorer and underprivileged groups. However, such a proposal cannot be easily implemented as long as government counterpart institutions do not follow the same approach. Moreover, experience has proven that, in a complex and interlinked society, assistance cannot always be successfully targeted to a specific group.

10. Members of ACC have endeavoured in recent years to remedy the situation. However, ACC wishes to point out that they have been confronted in many cases with the situation where both Governments and United Nations organizations do not have the capacity to consult fully with the ultimate beneficiaries. It should also be kept in mind that virtually all organizations of the United Nations system, being intergovernmental organizations, channel the bulk of their assistance through public sector entities that function within the framework of the national development policies and strategies. The long chain of interest in projects has been well expressed in paragraph 89 of the JIU report. The answer to that problem is far from simple. In that context, it is noted that the report makes no mention of the major prerequisite for successful project planning and implementation, namely, government willingness and commitment for the project objectives and activities supported by a coherent national policy for rural development.

11. The JIU report mentions in paragraph 25 that desirable elements of good project design were found to be less prevalent. In that regard, ACC wishes to point out that the present UNDP project formulation guidelines were developed and put into operation only during the past few years. Therefore, it would have been more appropriate to assess the design of the projects surveyed against the standards applied at the time they were prepared. Nevertheless, as already stated

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above, members of ACC continue to endeavour to improve the quality of project design.

12. In paragraph 43 of the report, it is stated that the Inspectors did not attempt to assess the achievement of project objectives in measurable or quantifiable terms and that their critical findings were based on a more informal assessment. Members of ACC consider that, in order to obtain more objective findings, it would have been useful to have made an attempt, at least in some cases, to measure those achievements using quantified simple indicators. Although that may have required more time to perform, it might have resulted in more concrete, interesting conclusions, enhancing the credibility of the report.

13. Some members of ACC observe that the report is totally silent about the environmental impact of rural development projects. They feel that it is essential that, in assessing rural development projects, their impact on the environment should have been considered, in order to ensure that the ultimate objective of providing sustainable rural development assistance to the poorer segments of the rural population is maintained.

14. Another issue that should have received more attention is the overall socio-economic environment in which rural development takes place. One of the recommendations of the thematic evaluation of rural small industrial enterprises, jointly conducted by UNDP, the Government of the Netherlands, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in 1987, refers to the fact that the macro-economic and policy environment should be conducive to the productive activities such as agriculture and rural small industrial enterprises. Since most of the rural population derive incomes from those productive activities, the report should have emphasized the importance of the macro-economic and policy aspects.

III. COMMENTS ON RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

15. ACC supports recommendation 1. Many technical assistance project documents already provide some form of framework for defining target groups as such according to geographical location, gender and occupation. Concerned members of ACC intend to intensify their efforts, where possible, to pay careful attention to the definition and identification of the beneficiaries wherever rural development activities are initiated. They are also of the view that an effort must be made to also involve the local community in defining beneficiaries.

Recommendation 2

16. ACC is basically sympathetic to recommendation 2. The importance of "helping the poor to help themselves" is not limited to technical co-operation assistance in the field of rural development. The need to involve beneficiaries to the extent possible in the formulation and implementation of technical co-operation projects in general is a principle clearly accepted in the United Nations system.

17. Policy directives and operational procedures on rural development activities already exist in certain organizations concerned and are under constant review with a view to further improvement whenever necessary. They are periodically reviewed by the ACC Task Force on Rural Development. ACC agrees that it is necessary to keep operational arrangements on rural development as decentralized, simple and flexible as possible.

18. ACC wishes to clarify that the organizations of the United Nations system are not applying the "top-down" project design approach only, and "habitually", to all rural development activities. The inference that the "project approach" is, by definition, synonymous with the "top-down" design approach is neither historically nor conceptually proven. Present efforts by the organizations of the United Nations system are focused on diverse rural development needs and problems with different strategies and approaches identified as best fit in solving them. ACC agrees, however, on the need for careful application of the project approach to grass-roots rural development activities.

Recommendation 3

19. Members of ACC share the general philosophy advocated to move progressively away from the "top-down, blueprint, supply approach" towards a "more decentralized, flexible, participating, learning-process, demand approach". As already stated above, the latter approach has recently been given increasing consideration in promoting rural development activities within the United Nations system.

20. As an alternative to the project approach, the report recommends that the non-governmental organization approach be developed, i.e., to involve more non-governmental organizations in the implementation of rural development projects and to channel more funds through them. Members of ACC generally view this in certain situations as a step in the right direction. However, ACC wishes to express some caution regarding channelling the funds of the United Nations system through non-governmental organizations, and draw attention to unfortunate experiences that have taken place in some developing countries, where a large number of non-governmental organizations operate without any control or co-ordination from the central government, and to the paternalistic approach followed by others.

21. As a second alternative the report recommends the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)/World Food Programme (WFP) approach. Members of ACC support the approach that UNICEF and WFP apply to their own rural development activities. However, as the report itself points out, in paragraph 104 (b), the rural development activities of those two organizations have "very little technical co-operation in the usual sense of the term", as their activities are specific in view of their mandate and competence, and also with a view to avoiding duplication with the rural development activities of other organizations of the United Nations system. Members of ACC are, therefore, of the view that there are limits to the general application of the UNICEF/WFP approach throughout the United Nations system.

22. As a third alternative, the report recommends providing progressive support to grass-roots organizations or groupings. Members of ACC can support the intention and general philosophy of this alternative. However, there are three points to be clarified. Firstly, members of ACC are not fully convinced of the statement, contained in paragraph 104 (c), that that approach would entail adjustments in present programming systems, essentially "for greater flexibility and for the disbursement of funds not on the basis of projects rigidly designed in advance". It would be difficult for practical reasons, and even dangerous, to approve the projects without having identified and assessed the specific beneficiaries organizations or purposes to which the funds are to be disbursed.

23. Secondly, as stated earlier, the organizations of the United Nations system have a limited capacity to negotiate "directly either with the organizations or groups of actual beneficiaries or with the established local authorities", as stated in paragraph 104 (c) of the report. The prior authorization by, or "framework agreements" with, the central government would be a prerequisite to such direct negotiations with actual beneficiaries. It appears that the implementation of the recommendation to test this approach, on an experimental basis, in a number of developing countries will very much depend on the willingness of the Governments to accept it.

24. Thirdly, the recommendation, and the supporting arguments made in the text of the report, contain little mention of the recipient Government's own role and responsibility in overall project design, which is important in that Governments are themselves not always in a position to implement, and also often not willing to appreciate the need for, "bottom-up" popular participation. Moreover, no development activities within a country can ignore the role of the Government.

25. In the context of the above third alternative, it is recommended that a "Rural Development Co-ordinating Committee" be established in each country in order to improve co-ordination of rural development activities at the field level. Members of ACC wish to stress that they always welcome greater and effective co-ordination at the field level and that they continue efforts to achieve that goal. With regard to the proposed Rural Development Co-ordinating Committee, they observe that the proposal to establish this additional mechanism may contradict the general philosophy of the third alternative above, namely, "maximum decentralization so as to cut the number of intermediaries down to a minimum", mentioned in paragraph 104 (c) of the report. In addition, it should be borne in mind that there already exist certain co-ordinating mechanisms at the field level, namely, those implemented under the leadership of the Resident Co-ordinators, the World Bank or bilateral agencies and Governments themselves. Members of ACC therefore are not convinced of the merits of that particular proposal. They are rather of the view that, instead of the uniform application of the establishment of such a co-ordinating committee to all developing countries, effective co-ordination should be ensured through ad hoc arrangements or through the existing mechanisms as best fit local situations, emphasizing at the same time that co-ordination is the main role and responsibility of the Governments.

Recommendation 4

26. In support of recommendation 4, members of ACC agree that more experience should be gained with rural development activities that involve at least a partial financial commitment on the part of beneficiaries.

Recommendation 5

27. The recommendation concerning the reduction of expatriate personnel could be endorsed in a number of country/sector situations, but not in general terms. In fact, several project review summaries, annexed to the report of JIU, recognize that significant project outputs were achieved when skilled expatriate expertise was included within the project inputs. Nevertheless, it is clear that conventional and traditional projects in which a number of foreign experts organized around an "autonomous" project unit, but with little positive effect on the national institutional frameworks, are far from the present needs of most developing countries. However, under some circumstances, particularly in Africa, specialized expatriate personnel continue to be necessary for project implementation as well as for on-the-job training of national staff.

28. With regard to the recommendation concerning a new type of professional staff with multidisciplinary expertise, members of ACC have already felt the need for such professional staff, particularly in the field of rural development. Due attention is being paid to that aspect in the recruitment of professional staff, subject to their specific requirements attached to the eventual assignments.

Recommendation 6

29. Members of ACC agree with the recommendation that, in broad terms, project documents for rural development activities should include information on beneficiaries. However, they are not clear about the intention of the recommendation that project documents should also include information on "who will gain and who will lose" from the project. That point is not elaborated in the main body of the report. The possible effects of the project are generally included in the objectives of the project documents. However, such information could not be so specific as to spell out anticipated effects on "local social stratification", unless the objectives of the project are over-ambitious or prejudging its outcome. Many rural development activities are small-scale and geared to specific problems. Effects of these projects in terms of changes in social stratification must be seen in a long-term perspective and are not generally their immediate objectives. Exceptions could be made to projects assisting agrarian reform or settlement programmes.

30. Members of ACC generally agree with the second part of the recommendation that project documents should outline the turnover strategy, with the understanding that such a turnover strategy is subject to changes depending on the eventual outcome of the project.

Recommendation 7

31. The intention of recommendation 7, which is to keep the number of intermediaries to a minimum and to involve the local institutions of beneficiaries, can be supported. Most members of ACC do not subscribe to the view that "project management units" should be invariably avoided, but accept that they should increasingly reflect local circumstances and opportunities.

Recommendation 8

32. Recommendation 8 largely repeats recommendation 5. ACC therefore wishes to reiterate its comments made on recommendation 5 (see paras. 27 and 28 above) as applicable also to recommendation 8.

Recommendation 9

33. Recommendation 9 reflects the general belief widely held by the organizations of the United Nations system and, therefore, can be supported. It is observed, however, that that recommendation has been formulated without substantiation in the main body of the report.

Recommendation 10

34. Members of ACC can fully agree upon all the three measures suggested under recommendation 10. Organizations of the United Nations system are already paying due attention to the recommended measures and taking them into account, whenever possible, in their rural development activities.

Recommendation 11

35. Members of ACC welcome recommendation 11 for more ex-post evaluations on the impact and sustainability of rural development projects. They also welcome the suggestion that the funding of such ex-post evaluations should be incorporated into the project agreements.

Appendix

The following specific comments have been advanced by the organizations concerned regarding the projects dealt with in certain paragraphs and pages of the report of JIU.*

1. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Paragraph 74

When project GCP/URT/084/JPN became operational in May 1987, the other project, GCP/URT/074/SWE, had virtually come to an end. Obviously, "cross fertilization" would not have been possible. It is not clear what "the charcoal stove improvement project" refers to, as neither of those two forestry projects had or has a charcoal stove improvement objective.

GCP/URT/084/JPN (annex, p. 68)

The Inspectors report their impression that the emphasis of the project is on production of seedlings and tree planting through hired labour. That impression is due to the fact that the project has both physical and other targets. The latter include mobilization of local communities with a view to making them realize the tree-planting possibilities in the area of operation of the project; tree planting is done as a matter of course in the upper slopes of Hai District and the project would have no lesson to teach the communities there. When it is a question of planting trees in the lower plains where the project is located, there is a fatalistic attitude permeated in the community that that is a nearly impossible feat. The project has an obligation to dispel that myth by planting trees. The project is, however, not stopping there. It is already addressing the task of creating awareness and sensitizing villagers, party functionaries and even Masai elders on the way in which they can play their part to make the exercise worth while. If the Inspectors had contacted party leaders at different levels in Hai District, their conclusions might have been different.

It should be pointed out that the project is part of an overall strategy of the Kilimanjaro Region, of which Hai is one of the districts, to encourage tree planting in the lower plains threatened with serious environmental degradation and a serious threat of desertification. Success at Hai will be extended to the other districts, first in the region and hopefully elsewhere in the United Republic of Tanzania.

The comment on "cross fertilization" made under the heading paragraph 74 above also applies to this project summary.

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* For the text of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU/REP/89/2), see A/45/76-E/1990/12.

GCP/URT/074/SWE (pp. 72 and 73)

The emphasis of the project was to promote effective village afforestation through integrated and co-operation efforts. To achieve that goal, very little in the way of external inputs would normally be necessary, at least in the initial stages of project implementation. With that rationale in mind, the modest sum of $156,053 was allocated to the project.

It is reported that the late provision of inputs had hampered the project. In this regard, we wish to clarify that the minute the officials responsible for the project realized that "funds" were available, the greater and more noble task of developing participatory tree-planting efforts was relegated to second position officials and they sat back waiting for "inputs" ordered from abroad to arrive. The effective tool of persuasion that was within their easy reach was not put to use, notwithstanding the exhortation by FAO that that be done and that the "inputs" expected from abroad would only constitute a catalyst. This call went unheeded, and hence led to the oft repeated but unjustified lamentation that inputs arrived late and that it took six months to release funds.

The rural development strategy of the United Republic of Tanzania provides a fertile ground to develop initiatives that are "people oriented", provided there is the right technical package and an appropriate "vehicle" to deliver it. It is therefore not difficult to find an answer to the difficulties encountered in the project, which was virtually government executed. The majority of foresters involved have only been used to the traditional tree-planting projects spread throughout the country, geared to establishing industrial plantations. The change-over to rural development-oriented tree planting cannot take place overnight. This project has provided pointers on what needs to be done, particularly in so far as training and retraining is concerned.

It should be pointed out that the project provided a poignant example of where government execution *per se* is not necessarily the answer. Government execution should be sought where certain conditions are satisfactorily met; otherwise there is no point in starting the activity.

2. United Nations Industrial Development Organization

XA/BKF/86/615 (pp. 45 and 46)

UNIDO agrees with the assessment, although it must be pointed out that the specific problems, which occurred during the implementation process, derived from factors that were beyond the control of UNIDO, for example, late delivery of equipment owing to seasonal (winter) shipping problems and financial cutbacks in project-fund allocations.

URT/81/032 (p. 76)

The project's immediate objectives were achieved: a number of project proposals were developed with the aim to strengthen the governmental set-up for non-conventional sources of energy. The project as such can only be considered as a preparatory activity, keeping in mind the modest input ($US 57,000). A more significant impact could have been obtained had one or two of the proposed projects been followed up by UNDP and the Government. It also appears to be a question as to what extent UNDP and UNIDO can influence a Government to initiate a timely follow-up action to a direct assistance.

3. United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat)

Although no single project of the Centre has been included in the 25 sample projects selected, the Centre wishes to point out that, in the three African least developed countries covered by the JIU report, it has provided assistance to rural development through the following projects:

(a) BDI/85/010 - development of secondary centres in Burundi;

(b) BKF/82/x71 and BKF/82/F01 - assistance to urban and rural settlements development programmes in Burkina Faso;

(c) BKF/87/010 - development and management of two secondary centres;

(d) TAN/2583 - rehabilitation of housing on sisal estates; the project was mentioned on page 77 of the JIU report in connection with the WFP project on rehabilitation of housing on sisal estates, but without detailing the nature of the technical assistance provided by Habitat.